

MEETING REPORT NO. 03

PROJECT: **Town of Needham Downtown Study**

DATE: 15 November 2006

LOCATION: Downtown Needham / Study Area

PRESENT: Downtown Study Committee (DSC)

Kate Fitzpatrick	Town Manager
Jack Cogswell	Chairman, Board of Selectmen
Jerry Wasserman	Board of Selectmen
Bob Smart	Cochair, Planning Board
Moe Handel	Cochair, Planning Board
Lee Newman	Planning Director
Nicole Bourassa	Assistant Planner
Mark Gluesing	Design Review Board
Kathy Lewis	Needham Business Association
Paul Good	Chair, Needham Community Revitalization Committee
John Edgar	Economic Development Advisory Committee
Tom O'Rourke	President, Chamber of Commerce
Jeanne McKnight	League of Women Voters
John J. McQuillan	Business Owner
Bob Hentschel	Property Owner
Peter Friedenberg	Citizen at Large

DiNisco Design Partnership (DDP)

Kenneth DiNisco
Richard N. Rice
Jon Oxman

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1. This meeting was organized as a field trip to walk through the Study Area. The purpose was to document with photos the existing conditions and to note comments from Downtown Study Committee (DSC) members. This field trip focused on the Center Business Area and the immediately adjacent sections of the Chestnut Street Business Area. See the attached photos.

2. UNDERUTILIZED SITES / OPPORTUNITIES

- 2.1. Needham Center Station – Parking lots and surrounding structures are under developed and do not compliment the character of the Central Business Area.
- Commuter rail stop, parking and surrounding adjacent buildings are poorly organized.
 - Train tracks cut the parcel. A member of the DSC raised the possibility of burying the tracks. This and another alternative of building around the tracks (to either side and above) were discussed.
 - Land ownership is fragmented.
 - There is poor pedestrian access. Alley from Chapel St is not pedestrian friendly. Access from May Street to the north is haphazard due to fragmented land ownership. Handicapped access to the train from behind Lewandos
 - Maintenance and cleaning is not consistent. It was pointed out that it was only recently the area behind Lewandos had not been cleaned. Site Lighting which would enhance security is also not maintained.
 - The MBTA which controls the commuter rail stations in Needham is considering moving more commuter parking from Needham Center to Needham Junction and Heights Stations. DSC members pointed out however that there is still a critical need for parking at Needham Center for Town and private employees and shoppers.
- 2.2. Walgreens Lot – The Walgreens building and parking lot are underdeveloped and do not complement the character of the Center Business Area. A separate meeting was held with a Walgreens representative. The Walgreens parcel is owned by a third party. There are 24 years left on lease with an option for a 5-year renewal. This store is performing well. Walgreens business model is for standalone stores. See Meeting Report #2 for additional information.
- There is the opportunity for a strong pedestrian connection from Pickering Street through the Walgreens parcel to Town Hall.
 - The DSC suggested options to consider for this site include building a new store for Walgreens on the same parcel in order to minimize down time for Walgreens.
- 2.3. Greene's Field / Stephen Palmer Building – Although not part of the study area, these parcels also represent opportunities to enhance the downtown. The Stephen Palmer building provides inadequate space for a Senior Center with plans to move out. The rest of the building is housing operated under a lease to be managed by a third party management company. Greene's Field includes a playground and baseball field that is well used. It was suggested that these two parcels could be better used by relocating the ball field and created multifamily housing at the Plains Avenue edge. When asked why these parcels were not included in the study area, Lee Newman stated there was sensitivity to the opposition to develop these parcels for commercial use but that a housing / recreation use here is possible.

- 2.4. Old Theater & Adjacent Parcels – The theater parcel has been under litigation regarding its ownership. The theater portion of the building has been demolished. The lobby facing Great Plain Avenue is vacant. In addition two adjacent parcels to the south, are underutilized or undeveloped and do not compliment the character of the Center Business Area.
- 2.5. Residential Lots Off Pickering – Six lots with single family housing off Pickering Street are underutilized and do not complement the character of the Center Business Area.

3. TRAFFIC / PEDESTRIAN CIRCULATION

- 3.1. Highland Avenue / Chapel Street / May Street Intersection – This is a difficult intersection in the Center Business Area. The layout of this intersection is confusing for drivers, can have long queues from Highland Avenue going north and has inordinately long wait times for Pedestrians. The adjacent gas station only adds to the intensity of conflicting vehicular traffic.
- 3.2. Great Plain Avenue / Dedham Avenue Intersection – This is another difficult intersection in the Center Business Area. There can be long queues going south on Highland Avenue through this intersection and it is a barrier for pedestrian traffic crossing both Great Plain Avenue and Dedham Avenue.
- 3.3. Afternoon Pick-Up from School – The afternoon pick-up of students from the Saint Joseph Middle and Elementary Schools, located on Highland Avenue and May Street, is a significant impact on traffic creating longer traffic queues along Highland Avenue.
- 3.4. Not Pedestrian Friendly – Several existing conditions contributed to an unfriendly pedestrian environment:
 - Lack of Crosswalks – There is a lack of crosswalks, especially across Highland Avenue and Chapel Street near Town Hall.
 - Difficult Intersections – As discussed above, the intersections at Highland Avenue / Chapel Street / May Street Intersection and Great Plain Avenue / Dedham Avenue Intersection are difficult for pedestrians.
 - Excessive Curb Cuts – There are excessive curb cuts on the Town Hall block on both the Highland Avenue and Chapel Street sides.
 - Narrow Sidewalks – In particular the narrow sidewalks on Chapel street in the Center Business Area are pedestrian unfriendly.
 - Stairs to Store Entrances – Some store entrances have stairs which intrude onto the sidewalks.

3.5. Comments:

- Make traffic one-way around the Town Hall block.
- Create a roundabout at Highland Avenue / Chapel Street / May Street Intersection. The Roundabout in Dedham on Needham Street was mentioned as an example and the Dedham Planning Director Arthur Noonan was given as a reference. A roundabout could also serve as a gateway into the Center Business Area.
- Crosswalks across Highland Avenue and Chapel Street near Town Hall have been considered by the Town. The cost for making the curbs handicapped accessible at four curbs was estimated to cost about \$60,000.

4. PARKING

- 4.1. MBTA Plans – There have been planning attempts in the past to create a parking structure at Needham Center. Communications from the MBTA to the Planning Department indicate the MBTA's current thinking is to reorient the Needham Heights and Needham Center stations to "neighborhood" stations where housing is introduced at the station, and commuter parking minimized. These stations become walking, drop-off, bicycling type stations. Needham Junction becomes the station that can accommodate commuters as well as potentially providing housing. DSC members commented that even without commuter parking at the Needham Center station, there is a critical need for this parking in the Center Business Area.
- 4.2. Parking for Retail – Retailers want parking for their customers as close to their doors as possible.
- 4.3. Chestnut Street Parking Lot – The Chestnut Street Parking Lot works the best of the existing parking lots in and around the Center Business Area. It is well organized and the retail spaces around it benefit. Although there could be better connections to the north, the passageway to Chestnut Street is well detailed.
- 4.4. Comments:
 - Narrow Highland Avenue to provide parking on the Town Hall Side. Also consider perpendicular parking on Highland Avenue.
 - Use "pay & display" type parking systems in place of parking meters at each space.

5. FORM / STREETSCAPE

- 5.1. At Indigo Restaurant on Chapel Street – The recent improvements to the streetscape in front of Indigo have been successful here.
- 5.2. At Chapel Street Vacant Lot Next to Gato's – This vacant lot streetscape could be improved like in front of the restaurant Indigo to the north.
- 5.3. Willit & Chadwick Passageway – This passageway is successful in giving a sense of place.

- 5.4. Lewandos – Although convenient for parking, with the spaces on the lot in front, the streetscape / pedestrian environment suffers.
- 5.5. Creating edges – “Drive Through Buildings” – There are several locations at existing parking lots where there is the opportunity to develop a edge with a new building with a passage for vehicles to drive through to parking behind.
- 5.6. Gregory Lamp Store – The existing detail of this storefront – awnings, bay windows, change in paving enhance the streetscape.
- 5.7. Circle of Peace – This sculpture engages pedestrians.
- 5.8. Highland Court – The roofscape of one building along Highland Court, across from Town Hall, with mechanical equipment detracts from the streetscape.
- 5.9. Signage
 - The Lewando Sign, if fixed up, could enhance the streetscape.
 - Signage at the Needham Day Spa as seen from both Highland Court (All About Nails) and the Walgreens parking lot detracts from the streetscape and may be non-conforming with current zoning regulations.
6. USE
 - 6.1. Poorly Performing Sites
 - Dedham Avenue – Great Plain Avenue (formerly Montego Bay). This has been a difficult site for retail. A pizza chain is going to be moving in. Because two spaces have been combined the pizza shop will have a presence on both streets which may help it succeed.
 - Vietnamese Restaurant – The site of the Vietnamese restaurant off Chestnut Street, next to the Chestnut Street parking lot is ill-defined.
 - 6.2. Too Many of? – There is the perception that there are too many banks, although from the landlord's perspective they are good tenants.
 - 6.3. Need Some? – There is a desire to have a Starbucks in the Center Business Area, but existing zoning makes it difficult as regulations require food service establishments to have waiters.
7. SUB-STUDY AREAS
 - 7.1. The delineation of the sub study areas is based on the delineation of existing zoning districts which may not apply to current conditions. For example the area to the east of the tracks at the Needham Station is part of the Chestnut Street Business Sub-Study Area, but would more appropriately be part of the Center Business Sub-Study Area. Former Planning Board member Paul Killin was given as a reference regarding the original zoning districts.
 - 7.2. There is a clear distinction between the Center Business Sub-Study Area to the south of May Street and the Highland Avenue Business Sub-Study Area to the North of May Street where the buildings are consistently set back from the street with landscaping and the buildings are more institutional in use as compared with the Center Business Area.
8. INTERIM STEPS

- 8.1. In addition to long range planning, interim improvements that can take place in the near term should also be addressed.

9. NEXT MEETINGS

- 9.1. The next meeting of the DSC will be at 7:30 AM Wednesday, November 29, 2006. Location TBD. The agenda of this meeting is to present the existing conditions survey and discuss preparation for the Community Workshop
- 9.2. A DSC meeting has been tentatively scheduled for 7:30 AM Wednesday, December 6 IF necessary to complete the agenda of the 11/29/06 DSC meeting above. Location TBD.
- 9.3. A Community Workshop has been scheduled from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM on Monday, December 11, 2006 to present to the community an overview of the Downtown Study and identify community goals for the Study Area.

The discussions of this meeting are recorded as understood by the writer. Please advise the writer of any omissions or corrections.



Jon Oxman AIA
DiNISCO DESIGN

JAO/

cc: DSC
Kenneth DiNisco
Richard Rice

Enclosure: 1. Photographs: (11/15/06)

Needham Downtown Study - Field Trip-06-11-15



DSCN0001



DSCN0002



DSCN0003



DSCN0004



DSCN0005



DSCN0006

Needham Downtown Study - Field Trip-06-11-15



DSCN0007



DSCN0008



DSCN0009



DSCN0010



DSCN0011



DSCN0012

Needham Downtown Study - Field Trip-06-11-15



DSCN0013



DSCN0014



DSCN0015



DSCN0016



DSCN0017



DSCN0018

Needham Downtown Study - Field Trip-06-11-15



DSCN0019-ed1



DSCN0019



DSCN0020



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DSCN0022



DSCN0023

Needham Downtown Study - Field Trip-06-11-15



DSCN0024



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DSCN0029

Needham Downtown Study - Field Trip-06-11-15



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